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House of Lords

Wednesday, 13th December 1989.

The House met at half-past two of the clock: The CHAIRMAN OF COMMITTEES on the Woolsack.

Prayers—Read by the Lord Bishop of Bradford.

Lord Acton—Sat first in Parliament after the death of his father.

East Timor: Policy

Lord Hatch of Lusby asked Her Majesty's Government:

What is their policy concerning East Timor.

Lord Reay: My Lords, our policy is to support the role of the United Nations Secretary General in encouraging a bilateral settlement between Portugal and Indonesia over East Timor. Such a settlement should take fully into account the interests of the people of East Timor.

Lord Hatch of Lusby: My Lords, will the Minister affirm that this Government stand by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution No. 1514 of 1960 asserting the right of self-determination to all peoples? If so, will the British Government take the initiative in urging the United Nations to hold a plebiscite in East Timor so that the people there can decide what their future should be?

Lord Reay: No, my Lords. In 1982 the United Nations Secretary General was asked to promote talks between Portugal and Indonesia with a view to reaching a bilateral settlement. We support that process and believe it is the right way forward. We believe that it is the most realistic policy to pursue and in that we are supported by the majority of our European Community partners.

Lord Cledwyn of Penrhos: My Lords, is it not the case that since 1975 a cruel but forgotten war has been waged in East Timor at the instance, mainly, of Indonesia and that over 100,000 people have been killed in that war? Further, is it not the case that Her Majesty's Government have been selling arms to Indonesia; and against the background of what the noble Lord said in his initial reply is that not inconsistent? Can he say whether it is the policy of Her Majesty's Government to sell arms in those circumstances? Will the Government use the offices of the United Nations to see whether or not this war can be brought to a just end and self-determination given to the people of East Timor?

Lord Reay: My Lords, with regard to the question about arms, arms are sold to assist Indonesia's legitimate external needs. We do not include items likely to be used for internal repression. We are concerned about infringements of human rights wherever they occur, including Indonesia. The Indonesian Government have been made aware of our concerns, including those relating to recent incidents.

Lord Rea: My Lords, as a member of the IPU-sponsored delegation of parliamentarians from Britain who were allowed a fleeting visit to East Timor in March this year, I ask one or two quick supplementary questions—or perhaps one. Is the Minister aware that the delegation was supposed to meet Bishop Belo, the head of the Catholic Church in East Timor, but that when we arrived he was not available for us to visit? Is he concerned for the safety of Bishop Belo, who is sometimes outspoken in his criticism of the Indonesian authorities with regard to human rights, particularly in view of the violent dispersal of a group of supporters outside his house on 4th November this year?

Can he comment on the EC's point made to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights last month that the human rights situation in East Timor is still far from good, especially as regards not allowing access for recognised human rights groups like Amnesty International to visit East Timor?

Lord Reay: My Lords, I was aware that the noble Lord was a member of the delegation which visited East Timor last March. Our understanding is that most members of the delegation found conditions rather better than they had expected. The noble Lord will remember that the delegation was allowed to visit Bekora prison immediately it asked to do so and was allowed access to prisoners without Indonesian officials being present.

The incident on 4th November outside the house of Bishop Belo is a matter of concern to us and to the European Community and we shall continue to watch the situation.

Lord Cledwyn of Penrhos: My Lords, I apologise for rising again, but can the noble Lord say how the Government are able to ensure that the arms sold to the Government of Indonesia are not used in the war against the people of East Timor?

Lord Reay: My Lords, all I can say is that we have no evidence that military items sold to Indonesia have been used in East Timor.

Lord Hatch of Lusby: My Lords, the noble Lord answered no to my first supplementary question. Do I understand that to mean that the Government do not accept Resolution 1514 of the United Nations General Assembly asserting the right of all peoples to self-determination? How are the Government attempting to put that resolution into effect if all they are concerned about is negotiations between Portugal and Indonesia? Is it not the right of the people of East Timor to decide their own future? Will the Government insist through the United Nations that that is carried out?

Lord Reay: My Lords, the talks between Portugal and Indonesia which we hope will lead to a bilateral settlement are taking place under the aegis of the Secretary General of the United Nations. He was requested by the United Nations to do exactly that.

[LORD REAY.]

I have no doubt that any agreement reached under his auspices is bound to take proper account of the interests of the people of East Timor.

Lord Hatch of Lusby: My Lords, the noble Lord must make the Government's position clear. Do they accept the United Nations resolution of 1960 asserting the right of self-determination? The first answer the Minister gave was no. I cannot believe that the British Government do not accept that resolution.

Lord Reay: My Lords, I answered no when the noble Lord asked whether we would take any initiatives other than those I have mentioned. At the moment we are not taking any initiative except to encourage the process, leading, we hope, to a bilateral settlement under the auspices of the United Nations.

Fish Stocks: Conservation Methods

2.45 p.m.

Lord Campbell of Croy asked Her Majesty's Government:

> Whether conservation of endangered sea fish stocks can be carried out by methods which do not involve the wasteful return to the sea of quantities of dead fish which have been caught and killed in nets.

The Minister of State, Scottish Office (Lord Sanderson of Bowden): My Lords, I agree that discarding fish is wasteful. We are working with the fishing industry to develop technical conservation measures which minimise the number of undersized fish which are caught in nets and then have to be discarded.

Lord Campbell of Croy: My Lords, I am grateful to my noble friend for that Answer, and I recognise the difficulties. But cannot human ingenuity devise some improvements in the system so that boats do not have to dump fish of high quality, of species which are scarce and in demand? For example, could there not be better co-ordination among all concerned when a quota is approaching completion?

Lord Sanderson of Bowden: My Lords, I recognise my noble friend's concern. However, in a mixed fishery of various species, as we have in the North Sea, the issues involved are complex. We need to be sure that whatever measures are introduced are effective and free from major disadvantages. A consultation paper was issued to the industry on 14th November and further discussions were held on 7th December. We hope shortly to be in a position to approach the European Commission with agreed proposals.

Lord Mason of Barnsley: My Lords, is the Minister aware that a major problem is the use of nylon monofilament gill nets? These large nets break, sink into the sea and become ghost nets for years, catching fish, diving seabirds and seals. If the Government were prepared to ban their use they could advanc conservation and also curb pollution of the sea caused by dead and rotting fish in the nets.

Lord Sanderson of Bowden: My Lords, we ar dealing with two separate issues here. As the nobl Lord will know only too well, we are dealing wit the problem of monofilament nets as it relates t inshore fisheries and the difficulties cause particularly in the area south of Barra and north c Northern Ireland. The question we must addres regarding white fish stocks is how to prever discards, which are large. To that end we have sever measures, including further consideration of squar mesh as opposed to diamond mesh and a reductio in the number of meshes around the cod ends. Thes measures have been produced by my department i co-operation with the Scottish Fishermen Federation to get round a difficult question and t try to bring about effective conservation.

Lord Carmichael of Kelvingrove: My Lords, th whole House will agree that this is a difficult proble and that everyone is looking for a solution. I ar pleased that the Minister has been in close touc with the Scottish Fishermen's Federation. Has h given thought to the federation's suggestio concerning the type of gear carried on fishing boat which if illegally used can frustrate any progress c net size? Has he considered the federation suggestion that there should be only one net p boat? Is he aware that industrial fishing vessels usir small nets frequently collect immature fish? Is h sure that the by-catch of 10 per cent. is enforce rigidly, and is it not perhaps too high?

Lord Sanderson of Bowden: My Lords, I thank th noble Lord for his support of one of the measur in the consultation paper which was indeed suggest by the Scottish Fishermen's Federation. I am almost daily touch with the federation on the matters. The prohibition of the carriage of both th 90 millimetre net and the 70 millimetre net on boa the same ship is a matter we are addressing. I ha to point out and warn the noble Lord that there a difficulties in this matter; in particular, difficulti with some of our European partners. It is absolute no good going ahead with conservation measur that are not agreed with Brussels as well.

Regarding the other matters, the answer is: y there are problems with industrial fishing: but, as t noble Lord will recognise, there is also a considerat amount of financial gain involved not just to oth countries but also to Britain. Therefore we mu move carefully if we wish to curb that particul fishery.

Lord Mackie of Benshie: My Lords, is the Minis satisfied that our partners, especially the Danes w are very competent at industrial fishing, are stick to the by-limits of 10 per cent., or are they in f sticking to the agreement made some years ago?

Lord Sanderson of Bowden: My Lords, answering the noble Lord, I should say that we our very best to ensure that enforcement is effecti As he will no doubt recall, the very famous c